

Salaita and the Information Professions: An Informal Conversation

December 11, 2014 5:30-7:30 in GSLIS room 131 and BBC online.

~40 attendees on campus and online.

This student-led event was sponsored by three student groups at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science: The ALA student chapter, Queer Library Alliance, and the Students of Color.

Food was provided by anonymous donation, drinks were provided by GSLIS student affairs.

Six students (representing masters, CAS and PHD, and on campus and LEEP cohorts) facilitated the discussion, which was held on campus and synchronously online. People also participated via Twitter using #uncivilILIS. These notes were taken via TitanPad. Please add comments or questions to this document, even if you could not attend the event. This gives us all an opportunity to keep the conversation moving forward.

This handout was given to attendees:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_dlgvHJpZzAMLq_eyJk1AR9t56ScnRv9A7p5uu3Q58QE/edit?usp=sharing

Storify of the event: <https://storify.com/AnUncivilPhD/salaita-and-the-information-professions-1>

Guidelines for discussion:

- Use “I” statements.
- Critique ideas, not people.
- Listen for understanding.
- Be mindful of the time so that everyone who wants to speak can.

Pre-submitted questions framed the discussion [those in **bold** were covered in the time allotted - the others in *italics* will be addressed at a future conversation - feel free to add comments]. The hyperlinks will take you directly to the conversation that followed each question.

[1] "I stand with the school's decision about Salaita. However, I feel like my view is unpopular in this profession & I am scared to speak out in fear I will be shunned. Can you accept that not all GSLIS people agree on this issue & be open to diff views?"

Another voice, Champaign, IL - Questions

[2] "I am wanting to participate in on- and off-campus demonstrations against police brutality and racism, but I'm now concerned that I may be disciplined by the University for my online and offline activism. What am I allowed or not allowed to do?"

BlackLivesMatter, GSLIS - Questions

[3] "I interact with many students who want to be involved but seem to be afraid or intimidated by the administration's reaction. How can I motivate them to make their voices heard without being pushy?" Bayard R., UIUC - Questions

[4] "Why do you honestly think GSLIS is unwilling to voice their opinion on the Salaita matter?" Bayard R., UIUC - Questions

[5] Who determines the line between what is "free speech" and what is "harassment" or "hateful" speech?

Questions we hope to answer in the next conversation:

Should a distinction be drawn between statements made in the social media and remarks made in an academic framework? And if not, where is the line drawn between legitimate comments and those that may serve as grounds for dismissal?"

"As librarians, how can we make sure our personal beliefs don't interfere with our professional responsibilities (e.g. ALA ethics) ?" Librarian, UIUC - Questions

How can I get involved in supporting Professor Salaita as an LIS student?

"Why should librarians care about this Salaita stuff?"

NOTES:

We began with the pre-submitted questions **[in bold]**. Attendees are invited to respond to a question, and then the next question is read aloud and responses invited, and so forth. These notes are an attempt to capture the gist of the conversation with no attributions. It is not a transcript.

[1] "I stand with the school's decision about Salaita. However, I feel like my view is unpopular in this profession & I am scared to speak out in fear I will be shunned. Can you accept that not all GSLIS people agree on this issue & be open to diff views?" Anothervoice, Champaign, IL - Questions

This is a free speech issue. If your personal politics are not something that people agree with that is your right to hold this opinion. I find it interesting that someone would agree with the University position given the outlook of this profession, but I wouldn't avoid you unless you were extremely rude about expressing your opinion. I would not act to prevent you expressing it, however.

Some people are confused by this issue: What is the line for professionalism? I don't like Salaita's manner or how he spoke. I don't know if de-hiring him was the right thing, but I do not think that he was acting in a professional manner. This feels like an unpopular stance to take here at GSLIS. I'm not against free speech. We need to treat people with respect.

One way to think about this is that there are unpopular views in the profession. Take filtering as an example. This is a barrier to access. How do we address the stance against filtering? This example is less fraught than the Salaita issue. In some ways you need to decide which are the issues on which you are going to take a stand. Everyone needs to make these kinds of decisions. You must be aware of the fact that there are many different issues upon which you might take a stand on, and there will be times when you will lose friends because of your position.

You have to have both sides of an argument present in order to have a dialogue. It is always the case that some will be in the minority. You may act strongly over a certain issue, but you can't worry about being forever shunned. The only way to make sense of complex issues is by having a dialogue. I was troubled by Salaita's tweets. But he does have a right to express his views. The question becomes one about how to express our views, to be careful about what we express in social media because many can see it, it is a permanently viewable text. The question becomes one of how you are expressing yourself.

In terms of the fear someone is expressing, or being made to feel sorry for expressing a contrary expression is important because among the justifications for the de-hiring was the concern about classroom climate. Although I do not support the decision of the University, I would never want to be the cause of making someone feel uncomfortable in the classroom.

I am unsure about whether it makes sense to talk about the "information professions." A very wide spectrum of things happen in this realm. There is a range of responses and we saw a very clear division in opinions between the sciences and other areas. We seem to fall somewhere in the middle, we have an interdisciplinary group of people at GSLIS, we have a range of opinions and it isn't possible to refer to this profession so broadly. There is a fair amount of diversity of views because we come from so many different places and worldviews.

One of the things that came out in the controversy about Salaita is the question about employment at a university, how the academy is different from other fields. It would be interesting to focus on what social media is - we spend a lot of time studying this. Recently there was a CNN reporter who wrote a very vulgar tweet about a FOX news person- he is still employed at CNN – the consequences are very different here. The issue of safety - what is appropriate - is a deep question for what twitter is, and what social media might be.

There are some who are able to get away with this kind of act, those who don't worry about reputation (celebrities, those in entertainment) it is a lot tougher for academia.

Do we want our profession to be this way? How much has this to do with monied interests - fear of losing money for the department? Or is the reaction here a form of peer review.

I want this person to know that Steven would stand with this person. I would also want this person to know that the University's decision that this person is standing with - has created a huge climate of fear and oppression for many people on campus.

Let's think about the context in which we are having this conversation, and the institutional force of the university - maybe what we see in terms of disparity of power, in terms of 'who gets to speak.' I think it is important to make sure that everyone feels safe and able to speak. What we as librarians, academics, information institutions -- what happens when we are silent, what kinds of power imbalances happen?

Lets think about Duck Dynasty - who was let go because of what he represented. We say that academia is different - here the point is to have a dialogue, and the point is to think about structural power, and to ask questions. Thinking about tenure - the context of academic freedom here - it is clear that our concepts of academic freedom haven't really caught up to social media. As we consider the baseline, higher education should be a place for conversation, and not for silence.

Speaking to the culture of fear - we are now aware that anything is up for grabs, social media, are we on 24 hours, this is very scary - what is private?

You must ask yourself: When are you representing your University? When are you a private citizen? What happens if I am acting as a private citizen, but my department head doesn't agree?

When you are weighing that decision about what to say or do, it is important to think structurally, about how people may react. It is also important to note that there is something very specific about the way we talk about Palestine and Israel, which often leads to silencing or to more silence. If we think institutionally about how this case happened, we must be aware that this wasn't the first time Salaita tweeted like this. This is his area of scholarship too. In de-hiring him, his voice is silenced, AIS is silenced. We walk around on a campus that is full of people wearing Chief shirts. This isn't just about twitter. It happened at a particular moment in time, but it is a structural issue.

We haven't talked about the fact that Salaita had to sue to force a FOIA compliance. Is this really about money? Is the institutional fear about the University reputation or concerns about money? Is it the reputation of scholarship or getting enough money?

It gets back to the idea of written rules (followed by the hiring department) in un-hiring him the University followed a set of unwritten rules. The problem with that is that you can't know what the actual rule was - they can call it incivility, blame it on discourse about Palestine - but we will never know. We need to follow the written rules, not to follow the unwritten discourse.

Money is an issue, all educators, not just professors are held to a higher standard than of 'role models' as we are entrusting the education of youth to professors - school teachers get fired all of the time for their actions on social media.

When we have this conversation we need to be cognizant of what happened with other instances - James Kilgore's story is important to consider. He authored a proposal to allot funds for a re-entry program for the county jail system to reduce recidivism. Someone, angered by this activism, wrote a news article exposing his past. The university knew about Kilgore's past, but he was dismissed, and though he has been reinstated it hasn't changed the culture of fear. I have already heard of one student who tried to set up a discourse like this one about Ferguson was reported for being uncivil and was brought into a departmental disciplinary meeting.

[2] "I am wanting to participate in on- and off-campus demonstrations against police brutality and racism, but I'm now concerned that I may be disciplined by the University for my online and offline activism. What am I allowed or not allowed to do?"
BlackLivesMatter, GSLIS - Questions

Some of the most important rules are unwritten, - you need to decide what price you are willing to pay, how much risk that you are willing to engender.

In the context of the experience with Steven - for a lot of us, as for Steven - it wasn't unclear - that there was a boundary to his right to express his political beliefs. The extramural utterances were outside what was to be assessed during the hiring process. This is an example of the unspoken, shifting standards that exist - the reasons given by the University were convenient, were the best they could come up with to cover up something else that was happening behind the scenes. So this action by the University is directed at a very specific moment - it is interesting to parse the differences between the two concerns. They are categorically different - what structures the emotions and what gets to be said. In both cases there is fear of speech because of repercussions, but this fear [expressed in the question] is deeper and categorically different.

I was an elementary school librarian for 10 years in Ann Arbor. There was an adult bookstore - but I didn't dare to go in there. There was no rule against it; I went to see them in other places -but knowing that someone might see me - kept me out. It wasn't worth it to me to do this. I understood this unspoken rule.

There is such preoccupation about how you feel you can respond to profound injustice - what words were on the protest sign someone carried in the demonstration about scores of unarmed people being killed. This gets us fixed on something other than the profound injustice itself.

These first two comments both deal with your offline life - how is it going to affect me personally, I think that these are linked to the culture on social media - as it is so unfiltered -

Female journalists often present with male names in order to avoid harassment. People see the tweets and know that it can expand into affecting their everyday life.

I am thinking about representing and what sticks out to me - speaking out about injustice, speaking out about ideas that go against normative structures. This is scary and there are real and profound repercussions.

Reiterating earlier points - - about risk you may encounter when you choose your battles. I think about repercussions and then realize that there are always repercussions. It can be liberating, at the end of the day because I willingly decide to take on the consequences, but then I've never had to face losing my life for my opinions.

Hoping to tie in the idea of risk, and assessment of willingness to take it. That comes from a place of privilege especially in the case for someone representing those who have no privilege. By saying that you evaluated and took the risk and then go on to silence them is problematic. It is also problematic to simply say that you live in a society and just have to accept that there are consequences for your actions.

I am disappointed that we have to have a conversation like this today, in this day and time. I think back to the free speech movement in Berkeley and how that spread like wildfire. Students saying 'we don't want racism, we don't want war'. That movement empowered all kinds of people, not just students, not just faculty. We are now back to a point where we again have a conversation about fear at a university. It is terrible and disappointing. It is only when people continue to fight for the right to speak that we maintain that right. We should not be fearful of what people think. We can't change society if we can't speak. [Addendum: The free speech movement was not just about 'civil' speech, it was also about the right to wear the word "FUCK" on your forehead. I am not advocating that we all do that kind of things today, but I am trying to make a point that there is a place for strong language in the face of massive injustice."]

[3] I interact with many students who want to be involved but seem to be afraid or intimidated by the administration's reaction. How can I motivate them to make their voices heard without being pushy?" Bayard R., UIUC - Questions

When people want to speak but are afraid, I think it is important to encourage people to speak to you individually, so they can work up to being able to say it in public. Do not push people to talk, but let them be quiet if they wish. Don't make people feel bad about not engaging in ways they are uncomfortable.

Maybe the case is that the students have good reasons to feel intimidated. I was just reading the NYT today comparing what happened then and now in Berkeley. The students there paid almost no tuition - today they have enormous debt. Students who are feeling strongly about

this but are afraid to speak out may be held back because of fear of what will happen if they get expelled. People in the administration are under pressure because of funding issues. Donors have power because of the decreased state funding. For everyone is under widely felt sets of constraints that previously people do not have.

My advice, if you don't try, you won't get a response. Write the email and let that person decide.

I want to speak about the emergence of the AIS and the free speech movement. This is about empowerment. This context we are experiencing today, much of our research comes out of that context. As to the motivation about speaking out - I'm not worried about the pushiness. It was precisely the acts of speaking out, about being willing to take the risks that led to the transformations and led to changes at the university. In many ways, Steven was representing Palestine in a context where there is a lot of silence and control over the media. Think of social media as a tool of warfare. Steven's expression was in the context of missiles being launched at Palestine. It was about blowing the whistle; have people read content written in jarring ways about this situation. These things are all related, this is not just an abstract issue of fear and repercussions. This is a specific issue of empowerment. There is strong backlash against AIS, the support for the administration, and the University that deconstructs the progress of AIS [American Indian Studies]. In terms of what is happening to AIS, that is a kind of battle, a kind of warfare. I would say what is that fear you experience about pushiness. There is a specific context for each instance you consider whether or not to be pushy. I'm not pushy all the time. What has happened with Steven is a specific thing that is happening it calls for aggressive consciousness training.

Pushiness has to do with the idea that people think we have reached a new level of social awareness. That idea some have of that we are in a 'post racial society.' You get eye rolls when you bring up social justice, or racism up in class. We know that we aren't there yet, but many people think that we are. There is that sense that we don't need to talk about these things - we are past them.

For me the issue is how Professor Salaita said what he said. I would expect there to be negative responses from students and the administration. I can think of equivalencies, how and what I might say. I think of how what I say might be interpreted, how people might read what he has to say. I don't see a way around it. The division comes from how we read and understand what we say. I don't think I would get the same support from my own community if I wrote about racism in the same ways. I have to think how my expressions would be interpreted on this campus. There is no way around it. The crux of the issue is how he said it. His anger was valid, but how he expressed it - we can't say that it never matters.

Part of the problem is that the administration is not scouring the tweets of everyone here. Certain people get targeted. Middle Eastern studies scholars are surveilled, and there is a lot of money behind the people who do this. It is not like the university administration is

monitoring all of us, it is that very powerful donors came to the university with a white paper that is supposedly lost - with talking points about the problematic nature of Salaita's tweets. I agree with you that it matters how you say things. I agree with you that the people who are close to you will warn you when you are saying things that are offensive, but I don't think that is why he got fired, the appointment withdrawn. When you speak out on these issues people watch and threaten to withdraw the money from the university.

As an engaged political activist, one of the things I think about is the nature of political activism. The different hats I wear, I experienced, by witnessing, an expression of extreme violence, and the manner in which I wanted to engage - I wasn't mindful of how I expressed myself. The way I choose to express myself on these issues can be blunt, and I do not want to be in a position where I will be constrained in my ability to express outrage.

[4] "Why do you honestly think GSLIS is unwilling to voice their opinion on the Salaita matter?" Bayard R., UIUC - Questions

Why has the GSLIS faculty as a group not been willing to either support the chancellor or to condemn these actions? There are some of us who are totally in support of a statement, and there are others who don't agree with this. We don't have the unanimity.

As a LIS student I find it confusing that some faculty are not in support of the action by the University, but the faculty who support the University have been completely mum.

Speaking with this question in the context of the library - I am concerned to see the silence here in the University library. It has been disheartening to see the divide. GSLIS holds the middle ground, which is important here - many of us have a diversity of opinions and I'd hope that GSLIS could help move this conversation beyond the silence that has existed this term.

You may not know how people stand on things. Just because they don't say things in public or on social media, you don't know what they might have said and in what context. As the idea of expecting us to speak out, in some ways this is holding the tension. You want a statement, but sometimes what is most visible is not where the work gets done. Sometimes the work gets done in ways you do not see it. For example, it is the institutional policies that hold intellectual freedom, there is no way that anyone will see all the work that goes into creating and maintaining that policy.

How does the division among faculty affect student willingness to speak out?

In fact I think it is often students who need to take the lead. The PLG are here, the ALA chapter can make a statement - you can't wait for the faculty to speak out.

I don't know if anyone else feels this way. I am not looking for a statement, you should allow us the space to talk about this and other issues that affect us within the college. I do think that

students feel silenced because faculty haven't talked about this in front of us and allowed us a space to come together. People don't know where the opinions of individual faculty members lie and are thus fearful of speaking out. We are looking for faculty take the lead. There was an effort to allow a space to have this conversation earlier in the term and it was cancelled. This is problematic and we need to talk about this, there are many issues the students in the school need to talk about – beyond Salaita, space for many more conversations are needed.

I wanted to speak to the policy of making a statement. There is some misunderstanding about what the departments meant by the statements they made. Among the sciences, many faculty members were afraid to speak out about her because of the issue of losing Chancellor Wise and who might replace her. There is a greater diversity of opinion than we might know. People can support Wise and Salaita. It is complex.

The principles we are talking about here has a lot of implications for the sciences. If your research is at a university that is funded by oil companies, and your hire is rescinded because your research is on the implications of fracking - this has many implications for departments - even in the sciences. What role do or should donors have in hiring decisions, in determining the focus of scholarship. Who teaches at your university? Who decides? Donors or departments?

Speaking as a member of the university library community: I have had a lonely time battling to try to get dialogue going on the university faculty. I have seen a change - 30 years ago people were more willing to talk, today they are not, there is a climate of fear. Some people will talk behind the scenes. There are only a few people who are now brave enough to speak, even if they have tenure, because there are sanctions for those who speak. Sometimes these are subtle. If you know or are aware that your role is to simply listen to the University Librarians and not to speak out - then you won't speak out, and will leave speaking out to the few who are scapegoated or pushed to the side for expressing their opinions. This is not uncommon in libraries. There is a space to speak SRRT [Social Responsibilities Round Table] at the American Library Association [ALA], we find solidarity together. You can also get involved with PLG [Progressive Librarians Guild]. You may feel like the only voice where you are, but know that there are people who you can find nationally – with whom you can be in solidarity. You may not feel empowered at your place of employment - but you can go to ALA and find solidarity!

There are many types of fear. We dismiss that idea that people think differently than we do. That fear [of speaking out] is very different from fear of reprisal. We need to think about what kind of fear are we experiencing, how will we navigate that fear. There are so many different reasons why people make decisions that are anchored in family concerns – how your family or community will respond to you that are not political concerns.

If you feel like you can speak, you have an ethical obligation to speak, especially where others can't because of various barriers.

It may not be popular, but I feel obligated to speak. If students don't see faculty speak out, the impression is that the fear is well grounded.

I didn't know that the faculty was divided on this issue, but when I arrived in August the first email I got ['The Principles On Which We Stand] was about Salaita, that what you say on Twitter might impact your job.

Something that no one has addressed yet - when we had the blizzard - people said things on twitter that were racist and misogynist - and she [Chancellor Wise] didn't respond in a way that I might have expected -

[5] Who determines the line between what is "free speech" and what is "harassment" or "hateful" speech?

What is the correct response to hate speech (such as in that example about the tweets by students about Chancellor's decision not to close the campus during the blizzard last year)? Expulsion for students?

As an LIS profession - we have this code of ethics that talks about intellectual freedom, and we have to decide when something is hate speech, we need to have ways to consider these, ways to have these complicated conversations and think contextually and comprehensively about these issues. We need to think about this as a dialogue - in context. For example, we need to be aware of the way that Salaita interacts with people on Twitter when they are being anti-Semitic - we need to think a bit more about how to determine that line.

A way to answer that is that in this case, the donor created that line. This is what it seems. This is dubious - it relates to power, relating outside influence - which doesn't pertain and inserting it into the academic environment. Salaita didn't cross that line of hate speech, but rather angered a donor. I am speaking as an alumnus from business, but as a student I experienced direct repercussions for my own actions. The issues here honestly seem to be about money as I consider them.

I want to be careful as speak here, because I feel impatient about worries over how the line is drawn. Whether on face-to-face, twitter, Facebook. I know clearly that I would commit a firing offense by harassing, or blackmailing someone. Short of that, I could publically post things that would seriously impede the ability for me to interact with my colleagues, students and other university faculty. I didn't have an upbringing that made me worry about who I am representing in my actions every single day and through each thing I do. I am more careful than I used to be in this town - in my accidental or daily interactions, I don't know who I might encounter. Recognizing harassment and bullying isn't that tough to do. There are differences in engagements in twitter that are different than journal article responses. Professor Salaita's engagement in the classroom suggests that if anyone is capable of expressing outrage in a

twitter feed and then going on to conduct a comfortable classroom environment, well he seems to be the poster boy for this. His teaching evaluations support this. The excuses that were given by the University, about concerns about his ability to create a safe classroom environment, I hope no one takes these seriously. This case is about the influence of wealthy donors. To engage provocatively without worrying about whether something is hate speech or harassment is something I hope no one has to worry about, especially if you are self conscious in your engagements and have critical reflection about your engagement.

One of the supreme ironies here - it was precisely because of Steven's understanding of the safety of Twitter that he was able to express rage and these intense things. His understand was that the medium of Twitter allows him to be protected, allows him to continue to function as the beloved teacher in the safe classroom environment. The chancellor got this totally wrong. The supreme irony is that he is actually well equipped to deal with the most difficult issues. He is a beloved teacher because of this. It is because he can express this rage on Twitter and not in the classroom that he is so effective as an educator.

The Chancellor implored us to move in a positive direction, to assist the university in overcoming adversity. I told her when she met with our faculty, 'What an ally we lost'. She seemed so sad by this. It isn't just bad for the university that we have lost Salaita but it is a loss for her personally.

Two things, when we found out that this happened to AIS, our director called the chancellor, and suggested she talk to Salaita because he could help her talk through navigating this difficult situation with the donors. He came to our campus this term with a poignant desire to work here and move forward. The media painted him as an arrogant person out to sue the University for the money. This is not at all what he has and continues to represent.

This is about the age of spectacle. The person becomes disembodied on Twitter, the Tweets were no longer, or just simply about or representing Salaita.

People say that in tragedy there is no bad person, it is instead a struggle of good vs. good. Every actor in this drama is acting in good faith, to do what they think is right - including the administration, Salaita, and the donors. In terms of social media, things are difficult to understand out of context. I looked at the tweets. It was clear that he was being sarcastic. He was making subtle and nuanced comments. The second issue before us tonight - this is really happening because of larger forces in society. I can comment from the outside because I am not from this country. American people have elected legislatures that do not support state universities, this situation of increased dependence on donors - Americans need to ask themselves why they have made this bed in which they must lie.

Addressing the money. This is serious money. Imagine that you are an administrator of a library. How will you answer that donor? What would be the repercussions of losing that money. It would affect many people. You can talk about this from dealing with repercussions -

what would happen otherwise – if the money a donor is giving was lost because of a controversy? Intellectual freedom and social justice are different things and they are too often conflated. This is a difficult path and I am still wrestling with this.

Using the money from a donor also has repercussions - which must be weighed. This is something FSU is dealing with the donations by the Koch brothers. UIUC is dealing with a case of losing 4.5 million dollars from a donor because of the decision to reinstate Kilgore. We have to be clear about what it can mean to accept a donation, what a donor may expect in return for the contribution. This has clear costs as well, and bears deep consideration.

How do we protect people when there is such a great power imbalance? If we don't give voice to the less powerful then we don't protect intellectual freedom. How do you navigate this?

It is about representation. Making sure that everyone is heard. Equality does not map onto issues of representation. Which case are you talking about? What is the case in front of you?

In this case, when we talk about the action in favor of honoring intellectual freedom. We need to determine what is the definition of intellectual freedom. Is this a narrow or broad definition? In this case I would say that Salaita's intellectual freedom was not taken away because he did not go to jail. Academic freedom - raises issues of representation. We'll find out what this all means from the court decision.

I'd like to bring this discussion back to a consideration of academic freedom. There is no broad or narrow definition of academic freedom. The definition of academic freedom is clear, it is given to us with our contracts. Yet, we are in a situation where the Chancellor and the University are expressing an interest in 'redefining' academic freedom in light of the digital age – creating a definition of academic freedom that could potentially constrain this freedom in social media. We need to be clear when we talk about academic freedom that this movement – among academic institutions across the country is a serious and threatening move about which we should be vigilant and aware. This does not just affect professors and instructors at these institutions – it also affects academic librarians and has broader implications for staff at these academic institutions.